DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 987 PS 024 685

AUTHOR McHale, Susan M.; Crouter, Ann C.
TITLE The Family Contexts of Children's Sibling Relationships.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 25p.; In: Sibling Relationships: Their Causes and Consequences; see PS 024 677.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Advances in Applied Developmental Psychology; v10 p173-195 1996

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Context Effect; *Family (Sociological Unit); Family Influence; Family Role; *Sibling Relationship; Siblings
IDENTIFIERS Bronfenbrenner (Urie); Sibling Attitudes; Sibling Rivalry

ABSTRACT

Unlike much previous research on sibling relationships, which emphasizes the congruence across various types of family experiences, the research described in this article explored between-family differences in patterns of experiences within families. The work is built upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and Magnusson's interactional perspective, as well as ideas from family sociology and social psychology. This article targets several themes emanating from the two main perspectives and shows how they have been applied in work on sibling relationships. Specifically, it considers the issue of sibling activities as important relationship phenomena, reviews work on contextual differences in children's sibling experiences, and describes ways of understanding patterns in children's sibling and family relationships. Two longitudinal studies form the basis for this discussion: the Penn State Family Relationships Project and the Penn State Study of Children's Everyday Experiences with Siblings. Contains 47 references. (SD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 400 987

8

The Family Contexts of Children's Sibling Relationships*

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Barbara Bernstein
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Susan M. McHale
Ann C. Crouter
The Pennsylvania State University

Children's sibling relationships are complex and multifaceted. Knowledge gleaned from more than a decade of research suggests that, whereas sibling relationships share some unique properties that distinguish them from other interpersonal relationships (Dunn, 1983; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), experiences with sisters and brothers vary tremendously across children, even across children from the same family. Differences between children's sibling relationships and the ways in which these differences are tied to family circumstances are the issues on which we have focused in our research.

In identifying familial correlates of sibling relationship qualities, previous research has highlighted children's experiences with other family relationships, including their relationships with their parents, their exposure to their parents' marriage, and their reactions to the relationships between their parents and other siblings in the family. A less common but notable

PS 02[illegible]

*We thank Todd Bartko, Wendy Gamble, Vicki Harris, Shelley MacDermid, Terese Pawletko, and Maureen Perry-Jenkins for their involvement in the research described herein. We also thank the families who have participated in our work. Funding was provided by The National Institute for Child Health Development (RO1HD21050) and The March of Dimes Foundation. Requests for reprints may be sent to Susan McHale, College of Health and Human Development, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 16802.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

line of investigation has focused on children's sibling relationships in contrasting family ecologies: family contexts defined by parents' marital status, the presence of a child with a handicapping condition, or the birth of a sibling (Dunn, 1992).

With some important exceptions that we consider later in this chapter, the results of this work emphasize the extent of *congruence* across family experiences; harmony or the absence of dysfunction in various dimensions of family life is generally linked to positive sibling relationship qualities. Theoretical frameworks often invoked to explain such patterns of association, including attachment theory and social learning theory, suggest that, in family life and family socialization, all good things are correlated.

From our work we have concluded that sibling relationships and family life are a lot more complicated than is implied by these simple congruence models. One goal of our work, for example, has been to describe the conditions under which congruence between family experiences exists and when it does not (e.g., McHale & Crouter, 1992; McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995). Particularly influential in our thinking about the complexities of family life are Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983) and Magnusson's interactional perspective (e.g., Magnusson, 1988).

Both the ecological and the interactional frameworks, however, were formulated to account for phenomena of individual development, and thus do not include theoretical statements concerning family relationship processes. In this regard we have borrowed from two related disciplines, family sociology and social psychology. From social exchange theory, for example, come ideas about the importance of partners' relative rewards and costs in their interpersonal relationships (e.g., Huston & Burgess, 1979). Feminist sociological scholarship highlights two themes that pervade our work: First, families are not closed institutions that can be understood in isolation from the broader social structure (an idea consistent with the ecological tradition within developmental psychology); and second, the family is not a "unitary whole . . . (with) a single class position, standard of living, and set of interests" (Ferree, 1990, p. 867), but instead, a diverse set of people, stratified by age and gender, with quite divergent interests, needs, and resources. The latter idea is consistent with the emphasis in recent developmental research on the "nonshared" environment of siblings (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). In the following section we describe how we have applied these

ideas in analyzing data from two longitudinal studies: the Penn State Family Relationships Project and the Penn State Study of Children's Everyday Experiences with Siblings.

Interactions as the "Main Effects" in Research on Children's Family Relationships

According to Magnusson (1988), the goal of psychological research should be to "understand and explain why individuals think, feel and act the way they do in real life situations" (pp. 16–17). Key elements of the interactionist framework are the focus on "real-life situations," the characterization of the individual as an active, decision-making organism, and the portrayal of the environment as a source of information for the individual in his or her decision making. Consistent with the organismic tradition, the interactionist perspective emphasizes reciprocity in person–environment influence and the importance of understanding the individual as "an organized whole, functioning as a totality" (p. 22).

One of Magnusson's most important contributions has been to demonstrate the implications of his organismic perspective for research methodology. In his longitudinal studies of individual development, Magnusson employs "pattern analytic" strategies, approaches designed to maintain the integrity or organization of the individual's experiences. He contrasts such "person-oriented" approaches with the more commonly employed "variable-oriented" approaches used by social scientists, wherein the goal is to specify universal relationships between variables. Strategies aimed at determining "how much variance" a set of variables accounts for in "predicting" a particular outcome variable leaves the individual important only insofar as he or she "provides the measures for the variables" (p. 20).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined *development* as "a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment" (p. 3). Implicit in this definition again is the organismic idea of the individual as an active agent in his or her own development (Lerner, 1986). One of Bronfenbrenner's most important contributions has been to delineate the different levels of the environment (e.g., the microsystem, the macrosystem) that persons perceive and with which they deal.

Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) characterized a series of models, varying in complexity, that have been used to study the

role of context in individual development. At the simplest (and least informative) level are "social address" models wherein two or more groups of children who differ in some family structure characteristic (e.g., social class, birth order) are compared in terms of psychological outcomes. As Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) pointed out, however, in studies based on a social address model, we learn nothing about "the intervening structures or processes through which the environment might affect the course of development . . . what the environment is like, what people are living there, what they are doing, or how the activities taking place could affect the child" (pp. 361–362).

As an example, much of the research directed at understanding the potential consequences of having a sibling with a mental or physical disability has been carried out within a social address tradition: Groups of children who have siblings with and without disabilities have been identified and compared with respect to psychological well-being or sibling relationship outcomes. Such studies often have concluded that older sisters of children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to problematic outcomes (e.g., Farber, 1959; Gath, 1974). Given the reliance on a social address model, however, investigators were only able to speculate about the kinds of family processes (e.g., the extra household task or sibling caregiving responsibilities of these girls) that may have been responsible for such effects (McHale & Gamble, 1989).

At the next level of complexity in Bronfenbrenner and Crouter's schema are "process-context" models. Here the researcher explicitly explores the family processes set into motion by the family's "residence" at a particular social address. In such research, differences in well-being of children with disabled and nondisabled siblings are examined, not in terms of whether one has a sibling of a certain "status," but in terms of children's family roles, relationships, and activities. In some of our work, for example, we examined phenomena such as children's household tasks, sibling caregiving, and differential treatment in families that include children with and without disabilities and also studied the ways in which these *family experiences* are linked to children's well-being and sibling relationship evaluations (McHale & Harris, 1992).

According to Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983), the most complex, "person-process-context" model allows the researcher to test explicitly the idea that the same family processes may have different implications for children with different charac-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

teristics who are growing up in different family contexts. The idea that objectively similar events can have markedly different implications makes sense when individuals are seen as actively interpreting their experiences. Thus, for example, when siblings have special needs and children are cognitively sophisticated enough to recognize the legitimacy of parents' differential treatment, "preferential" treatment of a sibling may not have its expected negative ramifications (McHale & Pawletko, 1992).

Despite their somewhat different emphases, Bronfenbrenner's model of human ecology and Magnusson's framework for studying individual development share a concern with moving beyond the delineation of universal or "normative" patterns to focus on differences between individuals or groups of individuals in the processes underlying development. Within both Magnusson's and Bronfenbrenner's perspectives, the study of individual differences departs from the typical variable-oriented goals of fitting models or specifying "variance accounted for." Instead, describing differences in patterns of experiences becomes the researcher's goal. In our research we attempted to apply these ideas, generated in the study of individual development, to the study of sibling and family relationships. In the study of siblings these perspectives direct our attention to examining the ways in which children's personal characteristics and the characteristics of their family contexts moderate the effects of family processes in shaping sibling relationship experiences and their psychological consequences.

In the following section we target several themes emanating from the two perspectives outlined earlier and show how we applied them in our work on sibling relationships. Specifically, we consider the issue of sibling activities as important relationship phenomena, review our work on contextual differences in children's sibling experiences, and describe the ways in which we have tried to understand patterns in children's sibling and family relationships. First, however, we provide a brief overview of the two longitudinal studies that are the basis of our work.

Studying Sibling Relationship Patterns in Context

As noted, in both the Penn State Family Relationships Project (Crouter & McHale, 1993; McHale & Crouter, 1992) and the Penn State Study of Children's Everyday Experiences with Siblings (McHale & Gamble, 1989), we applied ecological and interac-

tional ideas about development to the study of family functioning. The latter study focused on a sample of approximately 60 families of school-age children, half of which included a younger sibling with mental retardation and the other half only nondisabled siblings. In contrast, the Family Relationships Project examined the experiences of about 150 firstborn school-age children with younger siblings, who were growing up in two different contexts defined by their parents' work situations—dual-earner and single-earner households. The families in both these studies were drawn from the small towns, cities, and rural areas of central Pennsylvania. Reflecting the demographic characteristics of this region, they were predominately white and working or middle class. (For more details about sample characteristics, see McHale, Crouter, & Bartko, 1992; McHale & Gamble, 1989.)

Despite their emphasis on quite different applied themes (i.e., the challenges of rearing a disabled child; parental employment patterns), these studies shared several important features. First was their focus on children in middle childhood. Paralleling the more general developmental literature, not much is known about sibling relationships during this developmental period. The increasing autonomy of children in middle childhood, however, means that children begin to play a more active role in deciding what they do with their time and with whom they spend their time. We were interested in the extent to which siblings represented an important source of companionship for children in middle childhood. In both studies the older siblings' average age was approximately 11 years and the younger siblings averaged about 8 years of age.

A second commonality across these two studies was that both focused on children with younger siblings. Because a larger goal of our work was to understand children's family roles and responsibilities as a function of family context, we chose to study children who might serve as caregivers for younger brothers and sisters or have other special demands placed on them because of their family circumstances.

These two studies also shared a concern with analyzing contextual differences in children's family experiences. As noted, one study involved comparisons between children with and without siblings who had disabilities; the second focused on children growing up in single-earner (father employed) versus dual-earner (both parents employed) families. From the perspective of children's sibling experiences, family contexts involving dual-earner parents or siblings with disabilities may be particularly

interesting insofar as the demands of these contexts pose special challenges and place extra demands on older sisters and brothers (e.g., for sibling caregiving, household tasks).

Finally, both of these studies also involved two kinds of data collection. First, at each point of data collection we conducted home interviews in which family members described their subjective evaluations of their family relationships and personal well-being. In the study of children with disabled siblings, mothers and older siblings were interviewed. In the study in which we examined parental employment patterns, mothers, fathers, firstborns, and secondborn siblings were interviewed. The second data collection procedure involved a series of nightly telephone interviews in which children and parents reported on their daily activities, including household tasks, caregiving, and leisure. A question we raised in some of our work pertains to the links between these more objective accounts of family life and family members' subjective descriptions collected in the home interviews (see McHale & Crouter, 1992; McHale, Bartko, Crouter, & Perry-Jenkins, 1990).

During the telephone interviews family members reported the frequency and duration of their activities (e.g., making the bed, running errands, playing video games, or going swimming) as well as their companions in their activities (e.g., mother, father, sibling, friend). At each phase of data collection, phone interviews were conducted on seven evenings shortly before the children went to bed. Thus, our portrait of children's daily lives includes information about both weekdays and weekend days. In one of these studies, the design also involved data collection during the school year and during the summer months, enabling us to examine seasonal changes in parents' and children's activity patterns (Crouter & McHale, 1993). Using such data we began to construct a picture of family life across "social time" (Sorokin & Merton, 1937). A pragmatic advantage to this procedure is that data collection at the "event" level allows the researcher to aggregate information about children's activities in a variety of different ways to answer different (and often unanticipated) kinds of research questions.

Analysis of Children's Daily Activities with Siblings

Both Magnusson and Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of studying human development as it unfolds in the nat-

ural environment. Given its emphasis on naturalistic observations of social interactions in the home, much of the research on children's sibling relationships is compatible with ecological and interactionist themes (e.g., Brody, Stoneman, & Burke, 1987; Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Dunn, 1988a). Such studies provided important information about issues such as the extent of hostility and affection in siblings' social exchanges and mothers' roles in sibling relationship processes.

It was a pilot observation of one sibling dyad, however, that led to the first author's interest in examining siblings' everyday experiences at a more molar level. This observation took place in the home of a girl approximately 9 years of age. Her brother, about two years younger, was severely mentally retarded and blind. In introducing our study we told the family that we were interested in how sisters and brothers played together. Over the course of an hour we watched as our target child, sitting on the floor of the living room and keeping up an encouraging stream of chatter, rolled a ball to her brother who then rolled it back. At the end of this hour of "cooperative play," the child waved a cheerful goodbye and dashed out to the yard to play with her waiting friends. Later, as she walked us to the door, the children's mother gave us a sheepish apology for what she perceived to be her children's poor "performance." "You see," this mother explained, "they never play together." It did not take much insight for us to realize that, although this particular observation showed us how two siblings could behave when they were together, the more important issue was whether the children actually spent time together in their everyday lives.

On a conceptual level, our focus on children's daily activities is grounded in an ecological tradition. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted, children's daily activities are developmental phenomena that are worthy of examination in their own right. Yet, in the extant literature, "there [has been] no attempt to examine molar activity from a developmental perspective, to view its complexity and content as reflecting the level of the person's psychological growth" (p. 49). To this we would add that joint activity patterns also reflect the complexity and distinctiveness of children's family relationship experiences (Herbst, 1953).

Although we piloted other strategies for collecting activity data (such as asking children to keep diaries or asking them to provide a narrative account of their day over the phone), we were most satisfied with the structured telephone procedure. This "cued-recall" technique allowed us to obtain a reliable yet

richly detailed portrait of children's daily lives, including their activities with their siblings. This approach has the advantage of providing information about activities that are relatively low in frequency (such as a child babysitting for a sibling or two siblings setting the table together), activities that occur outside the home (e.g., siblings going to the movies or playing together at a neighbor's house), and activities that vary in terms of "social time" (e.g., weekdays versus weekend days; school year versus summer vacation).

Analyses of reports from 150 children who participated in the Family Relationships Project underscore the importance of siblings in the lives of school-aged children. Others have noted that the sibling relationship is often the most enduring interpersonal relationship, spanning the time from childhood through old age. Our findings show that, at least in childhood, sibling relationship experiences also take up more of children's time than any other interpersonal relationship context. As Figure 8.1 illustrates, the 11-year-olds in our sample reported spending about 33% of their out-of-school hours (on average, approximately three hours a day) in the company of their siblings.

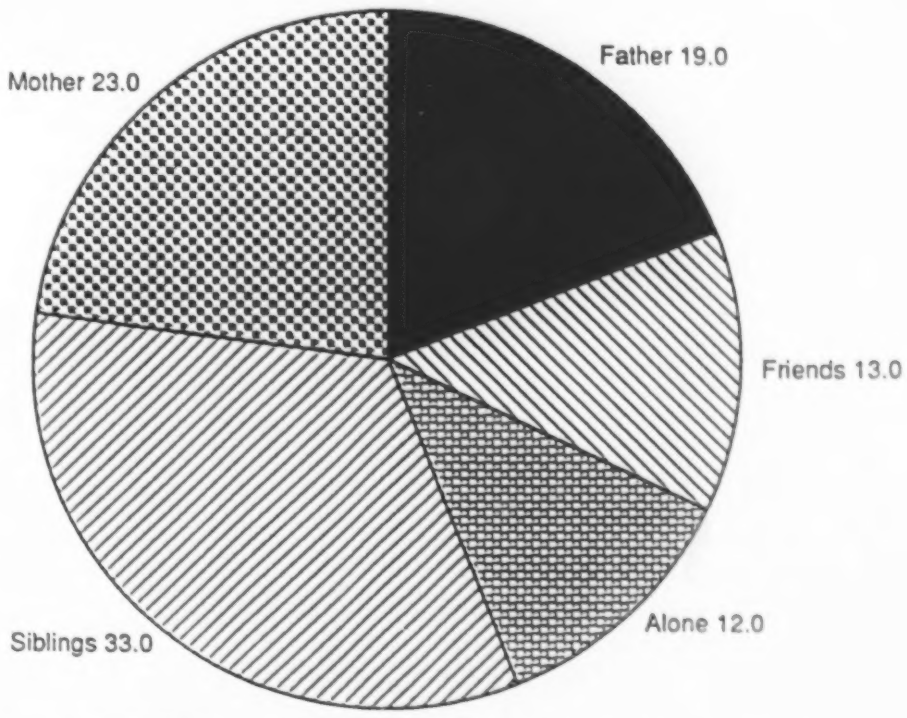

FIGURE 8.1 Children's companions in their daily activities.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

To foreshadow our next topic, contextual differences in children's sibling experiences, we direct the reader's attention to Figures 8.2 and 8.3. These data show that "normative" statements obscure interesting and potentially important differences in children's sibling activities, differences that emerge at different times and in different settings. First, in our research comparing children with and without siblings with mental retardation, we found that, although both groups of children spent similar amounts of time overall with their younger siblings, the two groups of siblings were quite different in terms of what they did with their time together. Children whose siblings had disabilities spent a greater proportion of their time in sibling caregiving activities, and it was the extent of caregiving, not the amount of time siblings spent together, that was related to poorer well-being in these youngsters (McHale & Gamble, 1989).

Our research on children from dual- versus single-earner families included the additional complexity of a temporal dimension. Using data from this study we were able to compare the sibling activities of children from dual- and single-earner families during the school year and during summer vacation (Crouter & McHale, 1993). Analyses revealed that, in contrast to other children, dual-earner girls tended to become more involved in sibling caregiving during the summer months. That is, contextual differences in children's sibling experiences only became apparent when the constraints imposed by school hours were lifted, and those context differences emerged only for first-born girls (see Figure 8.3). This pattern of changes in the sibling caregiving activities of girls from dual-earner families is an example of what Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) termed a person X process X context interaction and is illustrative of the "gendered" nature of children's family roles (Ferree, 1990). We turn now to a consideration of the potential implications of such interaction effects in children's sibling experiences.

Contextual Differences in Children's Sibling Experiences

As we noted earlier, a second theme in our work is family context similarities and differences in children's sibling experiences. Our interest in children's family roles and activities led us to choose alternative contexts wherein children might experience extra demands and responsibilities (e.g., sibling caregiving, household tasks). Studying the sibling relationships and

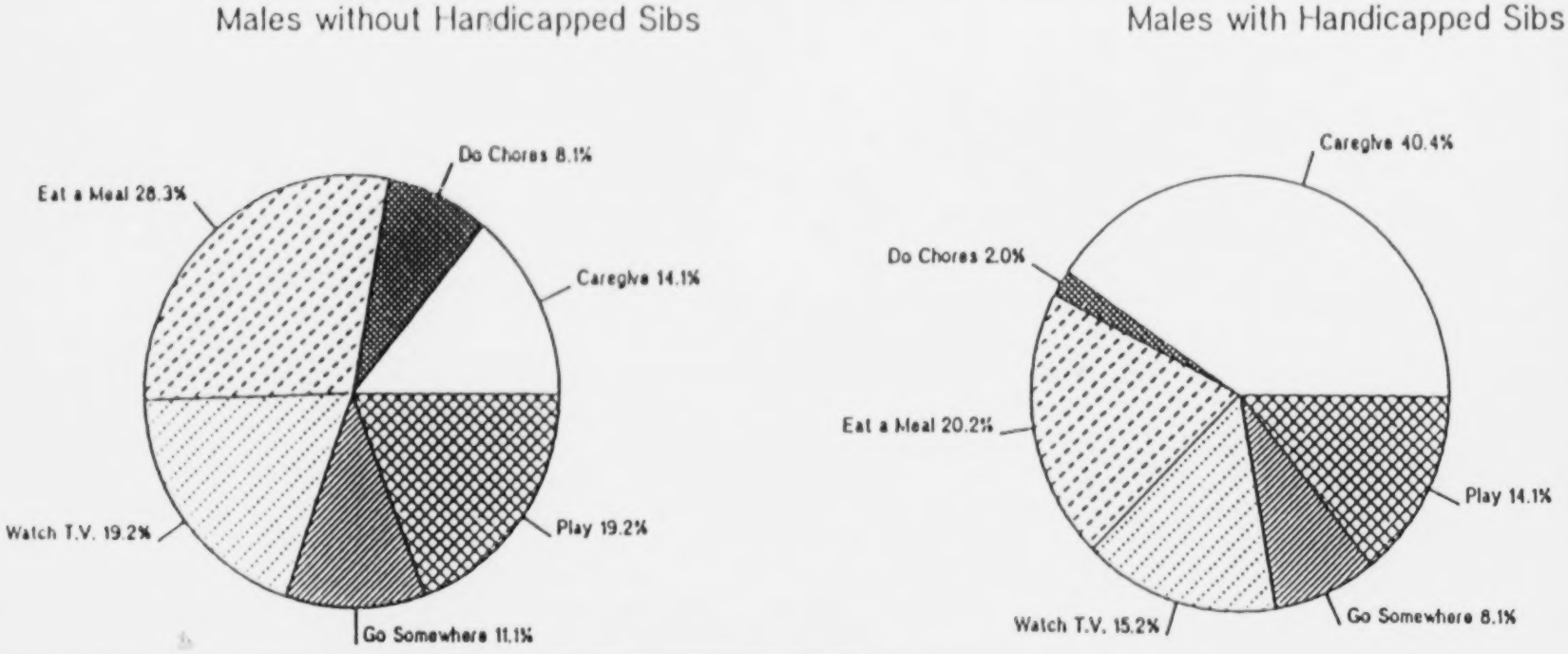

FIGURE 8.2 The nature of boys' activities with younger disabled and nondisabled siblings.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

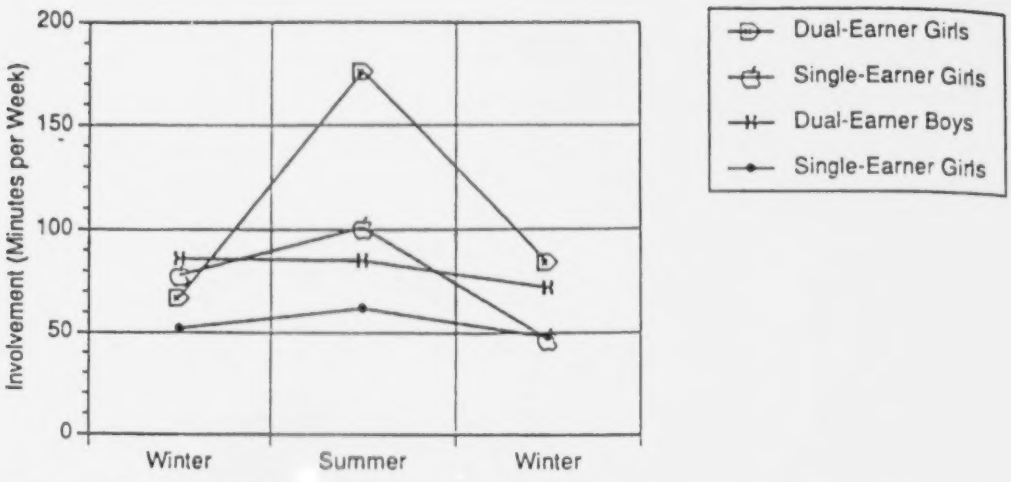

FIGURE 8.3 Seasonal differences in the sibling activities of girls and boys from dual- and single-earner families.

experiences of children in alternative family contexts, contexts defined by different demands and opportunities, provides for what Bronfenbrenner (1979) termed a "natural" or "ecological" experiment in which the investigator can highlight certain family dynamics that might be otherwise overlooked.

In addition, studying children's sibling experiences in context highlights the complexities underlying the links between sibling relationships and other family experiences. In most sibling research, investigators have been interested in universal patterns linking these relationships with other family dynamics. The assumption underlying such a view has been that family processes such as maternal warmth or differential treatment operate in the same way despite differences in children's personal characteristics or the demands of the family context. In contrast, the alternative, ecological model emphasizes the likelihood that the same family processes may have quite different implications for children with different personal characteristics who are growing up in different family contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983).

Consistent with the ecological approach is the notion that, although a congruence model may provide the best description of the connections among family relationships in nonclinical samples of families, a compensation model may best describe the dynamics of "dysfunctional" families (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Boer, 1990; Dunn, 1992). Thus, hostility from parents and extreme marital discord may provide the foundation for especially close and supportive sibling relationships in some families.

We uncovered evidence of other such "process X context" in-

teractions in our research on maternal differential treatment in families with disabled and nondisabled children (McHale & Pawletko, 1992). In this study we examined several dimensions of maternal differential treatment, including the time mothers spent in a variety of activities with their children, each child's involvement in household tasks, and mothers' discipline directed toward each child. Evidence of process X context effects was the finding that more frequent discipline of an older (nondisabled) sibling was associated with that child's more positive ratings of the sibling relationship in families with children with mental retardation; in contrast, in families that included only children without handicapping conditions, more frequent discipline toward an older sibling was associated with that child's more negative ratings of the sibling relationship. Given similarity in the absolute levels of discipline, these findings imply that what is, in an objective sense, the "same" family process has different implications for children from these different family contexts.

Both Bronfenbrenner and Magnusson cited the work of Lewin (1946) in discussing the importance of the "psychological field" or the "psychological meaning" of an experience or situation and its implications for the individual. Thus, children, even children from the same family, may attribute different meanings to the same family dynamics. In fact, analyses of the implications of differential treatment for two children from the same family highlight the importance of "point of view," an issue to which we return later in this chapter.

In the case of children with disabled siblings, we argued that perceptions of the legitimacy of parents' differential treatment may color children's reactions to this family dynamic (McHale & Harris, 1992; McHale & Pawletko, 1992). In families with nondisabled school-age children, a firstborn who receives more discipline may see herself (and be seen by others) as the "problem child." Receiving more discipline than a younger sibling with mental retardation who is not responsible for his or her own behavior, however, may not yield the same attributions.

These ideas are consistent with social exchange principles. For example, from the perspective of social exchange theory, what is "fair" is *the* central theme in individuals' evaluations of their interpersonal relationships: Ideas about equity in relationships imply that individuals evaluate their own "rewards" and "costs" in their relationship experiences, and "when individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships they will become distressed" (Hatfield, Utne, & Traupman, 1979, p.

101). A basic assumption implicit in these ideas and central in our work is that individuals within a relationship often will evaluate their experiences quite differently. This is because the balance between one's own rewards and costs and those of a relationship partner is delicate and difficult to maintain.

In addition to studying sibling relationships in different family contexts, a second ecological proposition emphasizes *sibling experiences as a context*, a context that may set into motion other family dynamics. Second-order effects refer to "the indirect influence of third parties on the interaction between members of a dyad" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 68). The extant literature includes many examples of second-order effects of parents' behavior (e.g., maternal warmth in the parent–child relationship, parents' treatment of the sibling, the quality of the marriage relationship) on sibling relationship dynamics (Boer, 1990; Brody, Stoneman, & Burke 1987; Dunn, 1988b; MacKinnon, 1989; Teti & Ablard, 1989).

Studies of how siblings generate second-order effects on children's other family experiences are rarer. One example is research on young children's family experiences following the birth of a sibling. This work shows how a new brother or sister can affect a child's relationship with other family members (e.g., Stewart, Mobley, Van Tuyl, & Salvador, 1987). Further analysis of how the presence of a sibling may affect the family experiences of other children (i.e., how siblings exert second order influences) seems especially important given the recent surge of interest in the "nonshared" environment of siblings. That is, because siblings may be as different from one another as unrelated children, determining how and why the family environment is experienced differently by siblings is an important research goal (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). The "same" family environment may have differential effects because children perceive objectively similar dynamics in different ways, because the same dynamics have different effects on siblings with different personal characteristics (e.g., boys versus girls or children with easy versus more difficult temperaments), or because siblings themselves treat one another in different ways.

Second-order effects also may play a role. Our work on children's experiences with their fathers provides an example of such second-order sibling effects. Previous studies have examined father-child relationship properties as a function of the sex of the child. The results of this work suggest a preference on the part of fathers for involvement in activities with sons (Hoffman, 1977;

Parke & Tinsley, 1987). Examining paternal involvement as a function of the sex composition of the sibling *dyad*, however, reveals that knowledge of only a target child's sex provides incomplete information about this family dynamic. Figure 8.4 portrays children's reports of their dyadic activities with their fathers based on nightly telephone interview reports. The children who provided these data included 103 firstborns from the Family Relationships Project (average age 11 years) whose secondborn siblings were at least six years of age (see Stocker & McHale, 1992). These data illustrate the way in which the presence of a same or opposite-sex sibling can alter the dynamics of father–child relationships. They suggest that, during the school-age years, a father's "preference" for boys is operationalized only when he has a son and daughter between which to choose. Girls may be particularly "disadvantaged" in terms of spending time with their fathers when they have older brothers. In contrast, the firstborn girls in this sample who did not have brothers did not differ significantly from either boys with or boys without brothers in the amount of time they and their fathers spent together.

On a theoretical level, although developmentalists have made headway in studying sex differences in children's family experiences, feminist sociological theory alerts us to the potential significance of *gender role differences*, for example, between daughters versus sons or sisters versus brothers (Ferree, 1990). Because gender roles are not assigned simply on the basis of

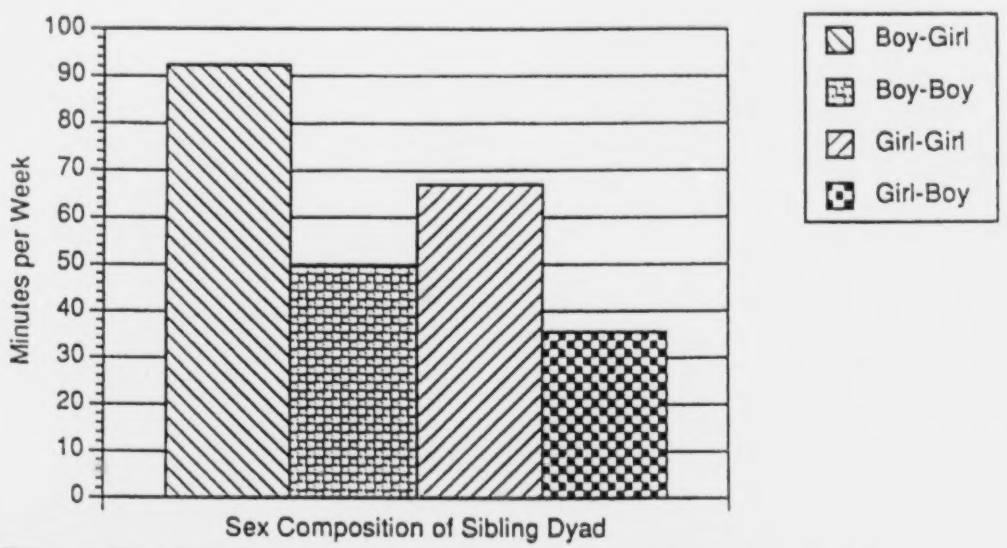

FIGURE 8.4 Differences in father–child dyadic involvement as a function of the sex composition of the sibling dyad.

sex, but constructed in social experience, a boy may take on elements of the sister role (e.g., in sibling caregiving) or a girl elements of the son role (e.g., engaging in sports activities with her father) if a child of the "appropriate" sex is unavailable. This perspective directs our attention to the larger family context of dyadic relationship processes.

The gender-role experiences that arise from second-order sibling effects may have important implications for children's individual development (Huston, 1983). Analyses of data from the Family Relationships Project, for example, revealed differences in girls' math achievement that are tied to patterns of paternal involvement: Girls with relatively uninvolved fathers showed declines in math achievement from the 5th to the 7th grade, declines not apparent in the performance of girls with more highly involved fathers (Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, in press). Again, such processes in girls' family experiences appear to be set into motion, at least in part by the presence or absence of brothers. In additional analyses of "gender intensification" processes (Hill & Lynch, 1983), we showed that increasing traditionality in some aspects of children's family roles in early adolescence is exacerbated by the presence of a younger sibling of the opposite sex (Crouter, Manke, & McHale, 1995).

In sum, moving beyond "universalistic" or normative ideas about sibling relationships to studying these relationships in context represents a potentially fruitful line of inquiry for this field. In our work, we focused on two propositions emanating from an ecological tradition: the ways in which the larger family environment may mediate or moderate sibling relationship processes, and the role of second-order effects of sibling experiences on dynamics within the family. We turn now to a consideration of a final issue, implicit in ecological ideas and explicated by Magnusson (1988) within his interactionist perspective: the study of *patterns* in children's sibling and family experiences.

Identifying Patterns in Children's Sibling and Family Experiences

As we noted at the outset of this chapter, a goal of our work has been to understand between-family differences in patterns of experiences within families. Our focus on patterns is grounded in a concern with treating families and family relationships as units of analysis; in so doing, the organization or integrity of family members' experiences is highlighted.

We have several reasons for adopting a pattern analytic approach in the study of children's sibling and family relationships. First, although experimental designs allow for random assignment to groups representing all possible combinations of the independent variables of interest, field researchers who study sibling relationships in the naturalistic environment of the family cannot assume that person, process, and contextual characteristics are independent. Rather, there typically exist "natural confounds" among the constructs in which researchers are interested. Using an example outlined earlier, we expect that sibling sex constellation and father–child relationship properties are not randomly distributed across families. Thus, questions about how much variance sibling gender independently contributes to a measure of sibling relationship quality or child outcome miss the point that, in the real world, sibling gender co-occurs with other family qualities. From this perspective, a logical first step in field research on families is the identification of groups of individuals or families who share a similar pattern of characteristics. Following the identification of theoretically interesting family "types" that vary along several dimensions of family processes and characteristics, differences in relationship or individual "outcomes" can then be explored.

A second advantage of a pattern-analytic approach is that this conceptual framework gives rise to alternative research questions about sibling relationship experiences. Our research on the family correlates of mothers' and fathers' differential treatment provides an example of a pattern-analytic approach "in action" (McHale et al., 1993). Several previous studies of differential treatment have included data about both mothers' and fathers' behavior (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1992a, 1992b; Volling & Belsky, 1992). The conceptual underpinnings of their work led these researchers to treat the two parents' behavior independently and to ask "normative" questions about whether the correlates of maternal and paternal differential treatment differ and whether paternal differential treatment better accounts for differences in sibling relationship properties than maternal behavior.

In contrast, our conceptual framework led us to frame our question about mothers' and fathers' behavior in terms of differences between families in parental patterns of differential treatment. Using data from the Family Relationships Project, we began by identifying groups of families that differed in patterns defined by mothers' and fathers' behavior. Of theoretical interest were: (a) a *complementary* pattern of differential treatment

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

(in which mothers favored one child and fathers favored the other); (b) a *congruent* pattern (in which both parents favored the same child or both displayed equal treatment); and (c) an *incongruent* pattern (one parent displayed preferential and the other equal treatment). Given the notion from the literature that equal treatment is the optimal parenting strategy, we began our study with the idea that the negative implications of one parent's "favoritism" toward a child might be offset if the other parent favored the sibling (i.e., that differential treatment might be experienced by siblings at the level of the parental dyad).

Our findings revealed, however, that a complementary pattern of parental differential treatment was rare. Instead, parents were likely either to exhibit similar patterns of "favoritism" or to display a pattern in which one parent exhibited differential and the other equal treatment (the incongruent pattern). Our analyses revealed, further, that these parental patterns were linked to sibling, marital, and parent–child relationship properties as well as to children's individual well-being. With respect to our interest in patterns, an important finding was that incongruence in parental warmth (i.e., one parent reporting equal treatment and the other preferential treatment) was associated with more negative ratings of the marital relationship by parents. Such a finding is consistent with the hypothesis that differential treatment of siblings may reflect a parent–child coalition that arises in distressed marriages (Reiss et al., 1993). Exploring this hypothesis, however, required a conceptual and methodological approach wherein the organization or integrity of family experiences was maintained.

Patterns also are important at the dependent variable end of the equation. Analyzing patterns in siblings' well-being and family relationship outcomes gives rise to alternative models of individual and family functioning. At the outset of this chapter we noted that much existing literature promotes a model of congruence in family experiences. The family portrait that emerges is simple and straightforward: Parents with good marriages exhibit better parenting styles, giving rise to more positive sibling relationships and more adaptive child well-being. This model may make sense when one examines outcomes one at a time. Examining *patterns* in family members' well-being or in individual functioning across several domains, however, suggests a more complicated state of affairs. In a nutshell, optimization in one arena of individual or family functioning may come at the expense of accomplishments in another.

As we suggested, applying these ideas at the level of the family involves examining *patterns or profiles across family members' experiences*. In our work on parents' differential treatment, for example, we compared two siblings' reactions to the same pattern of parental treatment. Examining patterns across two siblings' outcomes suggests that parents' favoritism toward one sibling may enhance that child's self esteem or parent-child relationship evaluations—at the expense of those of the brother or sister (McHale et al., 1993). These findings are consistent with results of other analyses of sibling differences in adjustment (e.g., Daniels, Dunn, Furstenberg, & Plomin, 1985). They are also in accord with the principle from social exchange and feminist sociological theories that individuals in a relationship often have competing interests (Ferree, 1990; Huston & Burgess, 1979).

These ideas also can be brought to the level of the individual, highlighting an alternative model of individual adaptation. For example, results from both of our studies described here suggest that children who experience preferential parental treatment may report a less harmonious sibling relationship, but profit in terms of their individual well-being (McHale & Pawletko, 1992; McHale et al., 1993). Similarly, research by Dunn and Kendrick (1981) suggests that girls who have closer, more playful, and intense relationships with their mothers may actually have a more difficult time adjusting to the birth of a sibling. Finally, we argued that the slightly higher levels of anxiety reported by children in some challenging family circumstances may be the price of a more mature sense of self and a more sophisticated understanding of the world (McHale & Gamble, 1989).

In short, analyzing patterns highlights the choices and tradeoffs made by individuals and families in balancing different and often competing interests and needs. At the level of the individual, "development is never only a gain" (Baltes & Baltes, 1990, p. 16); rather, accomplishments in one domain are pursued at the expense of skills in another, and personal achievements may come at the price of interpersonal relationships. At the level of the family, promoting the needs and interests of one member may give rise to differences in individuals within the family: differences between brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, or parents and children in their emotional well-being, personal achievement, and evaluations of family life. Conceptual and analytical approaches that ignore these patterns paint a deceptively simple portrait of individual and family functioning.

CONCLUSIONS

The task of understanding sibling relationships is necessarily complex. It involves (at minimum) analyzing relationships that: (a) include multiple dimensions (e.g., warmth, conflict, involvement), (b) are experienced by two children in potentially different ways, (c) are tied to diverse elements of family dynamics, (d) operate differently in different family contexts, and (e) change continually as children mature.

Much of the existing research on sibling relationships is grounded in a traditional developmental framework. From developmental psychology come important ideas about how age-related qualities of children (such as their social cognitive or emotional development) may be connected to sibling experiences as well as ideas about changes over time in relationship properties. In contrast, social psychological notions about interpersonal processes, including interpersonal perception and social exchange, direct our attention to the sibling dyad as the unit of analysis. Furthermore, ecological and sociological perspectives alert us to the ways in which outside forces can penetrate the family and alter the nature and meaning of sibling experiences. In this chapter we tried to show how ideas from several disciplines can be brought to bear on the study of siblings. We believe that adopting a multidisciplinary approach can provide new insights to investigators engaged in the complicated task of understanding sibling relationships.

REFERENCES

Baltes, P. B., & Baltes, M. M. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation. In P. B. Baltes & M. M. Baltes (Eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences* (pp. 1–34). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Bank, S., & Kahn, M.D. (1982). *The sibling bond.* New York: Basic.

Boer, F. (1990). *Sibling relationships in middle childhood.* Leiden: DSWO University of Leiden Press.

Brody, G. H., Stoneman, Z., & Burke, M. (1987). Child temperaments, maternal differential behavior, and sibling relationships. *Developmental Psychology, 23,* 354–362.

Brody, G. H., Stoneman, Z., & McCoy, J. K. (1992a). Associations of maternal and paternal direct and differential behavior with sibling re-

lationships: Contemporaneous and longitudinal analyses. *Child Development, 63,* 82–92.

Brody, G. H., Stoneman, Z., & McCoy, J. K. (1992b). Parental differential treatment of siblings and sibling differences in negative emotionality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54,* 643–651.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments in nature and by design.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Crouter, A. (1983). The evolution of environmental models in developmental research. In P. Mussen (Series Ed.) & W. Kessen (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. History, theory, and methods* (pp. 358–414). New York: Wiley.

Bryant, B., & Crockenberg, S. (1980). Correlates and dimensions of prosocial behavior: A study of female siblings and their mothers. *Child Development, 51,* 529–544.

Crouter, A., Manke, B., & McHale, S. The family context of gender intensification in early adolescence. *Child Development, 66,* 317–329.

Crouter, A., & McHale, S. (1993). Temporal rhythms in family life: Seasonal variation in the relation between parental work and family processes. *Developmental Psychology, 29,* 198–205.

Daniels, D., Dunn, J., Furstenberg, F. F., & Plomin, R. (1985). Environmental differences within the family and adjustment differences within pairs of adolescent siblings. *Child Development, 56,* 764–774.

Dunn, J. (1983). Sibling relationships in early childhood. *Child Development, 54,* 787–811.

Dunn, J. (1988a). *The beginnings of social understanding.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dunn, J. (1988b). Connections between relationships: Implications of research on mothers and siblings. In R. A. Hinde & J. Stevenson-Hinde (Eds.), *Relationships within families: Mutual influences* (pp. 168–180). New York: Oxford University Press.

Dunn, J. (1992). Sisters and brothers: Current issues in developmental research. In F. Boer & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Children's sibling relationships: Developmental and clinical issues.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Dunn, J., & Kendrick, C. (1981). Interaction between young siblings: Association with the interaction between mother and firstborn. *Developmental Psychology, 17,* 336–343.

Dunn, J., & Plomin, R. (1990). *Separate lives: Why siblings are so different.* New York: Basic.

Farber, B. (1959). Effects of a severely mentally retarded child on family integration. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 21*(2, Serial No. 75).

Ferree, M. M. (1990). Beyond separate spheres: Feminism and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 52,* 866–884.

Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1985). Children's perceptions of the qualities of sibling relationships. *Child Development, 56,* 448–461.

Gath, A. (1974). Sibling reactions to mental handicap: A comparison of the brothers and sisters of mongol children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 15*, 187–198.

Hatfield, E., Utne, M. K., & Traupman, J. (1979). Equity theory and intimate relationships. In R. L. Burgess & T. L. Huston (Eds.), *Social exchange in developing relationships* (pp. 99–133). New York: Academic Press.

Herbst, P. (1953). Analysis and measurement of a situation: The child in the family. *Human Relations, 6*, 113–140.

Hill, J., & Lynch, M. (1983). The intensification of gender-related role expectations during early adolescence. In J. Brooks-Gunn & A. Petersen (Eds.), *Girls at puberty: Biological and psychosocial perspectives* (pp. 201–228). New York: Plenum.

Hoffman, L. (1977). Changes in family roles, socialization and sex differences. *American Psychologist, 32*, 644–657.

Huston, A. (1983). Sex-typing. In P. H. Mussen (Series Ed.) & E. M. Hetherington (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (pp. 387–467). New York: Wiley.

Huston, T. L., & Burgess, R. L. (1979). Social exchange in developing relationships: An overview. In R. L. Burgess & T. L. Huston (Eds.), *Social exchange in developing relationships* (pp. 3–28). New York: Academic Press.

Lerner, R. (1986). *Concepts and theories of human development*. New York: Random House.

Lewin, K. (1946). Behavior and development as a function of the total situation. In L. Carmichael (Ed.), *Manual of child psychology* (pp. 918–970). New York: Wiley.

MacKinnon, C. E. (1989). An observational investigation of sibling interactions in married and divorced families. *Development Psychology, 25*, 36–44.

Magnusson, (1988). *Individual development from an interactional perspective: A longitudinal study*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

McHale, S. M., Bartko, W. T., Crouter, A. C., & Perry-Jenkins, M. (1990). Children's housework and psychosocial functioning: The mediating effects of parents' sex role behaviors and attitudes. *Child Development, 61*, 1413–1426.

McHale, S., & Crouter, A. (1992). You can't always get what you want: Incongruence between sex role attitudes and family work roles and its implications for marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54*, 537–547.

McHale, S. & Crouter, A., & Bartko, T. (1992). Equity in parental roles and its implications for school-aged children. In D. Featherman, R. Lerner, & M. Perlmutter (Eds.), *Lifespan development and behavior* (Vol. 11, pp. 49–81). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

McHale, S., Crouter, A., McGuire, S., & Updegraff, K. (1993). Congruence between mothers' and fathers' differential treatment of sib-

lings: Links with family relations and children's well-being. *Child Development, 66,* 116–128.

McHale, S., & Gamble, W. (1989). Sibling relationships of children with disabled and nondisabled brothers and sisters. *Developmental Psychology, 25,* 421–429.

McHale, S., & Harris, V. (1992). Children's experiences with disabled and nondisabled siblings: Links with personal adjustment and relationship evaluations. In F. Boer & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Children's sibling relationships: Developmental and clinical issues* (pp. 83–100). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

McHale, S., & Pawletko, T. M. (1992). Differential treatment of siblings in two family contexts. *Child Development, 63,* 68–81.

Parke, R., & Tinsley, B. (1987). Family interaction in infancy. In J. Osofsky (Ed.), *Handbook of infant development* (2nd ed.) (pp. 579–641). New York: Wiley.

Reiss, D., Plomin, R., Hetherington, E. M., Howe, G., Rovine, M., Tryon, A., & Stanley, M. (1993). The separate world of teenage siblings: An introduction to the study of nonshared environment and adolescent development. In E. M. Hetherington, D. Reiss, & R. Plomin (Eds.), *Separate social worlds of siblings: Importance of nonshared environment on development* (pp. 63–110). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Sorokin, P., & Merton, R. (1937). Social time: A methodological and functional analysis. *American Journal of Sociology, 42,* 615–629.

Stewart, R. B., Mobley, L. A., Van Tuyl, S. S., & Salvador, M. A. (1987). The firstborn's adjustment to the birth of a sibling: A longitudinal assessment. *Child Development, 55,* 1322–1332.

Stocker, C., & McHale, S. (1992). Links between sibling and parent-child relationships in early adolescence. *Journal of Personal and Social Relationships, 9,* 179–195.

Teti, D. M., & Ablard, K. E. (1989). Security of attachment and infant-sibling relationships: A laboratory study. *Child Development, 60,* 1519–1528.

Updegraff, K., McHale, S., & Crouter, A., (in press). Egalitarian and traditional families: What they mean for boys' and girls' performance in math. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence.*

Volling, B., & Belsky, J. (1992). The contribution of mother–child and father-child relationships to the quality of sibling interaction: A longitudinal study. *Child Development, 63,* 1209–1222.